

THOMAS KOLSTER

**THE HERO**

**TRAP**

How to win in a post-purpose market  
by putting people in charge

ROUTLEDGE



# The Hero Trap

Most companies today are firmly on the social and environmental issues bandwagon like bees around a honey pot from oceans plastic to diversity. People are increasingly distrustful towards these efforts viewed as cheap marketing stunts meant to wow people into buying more. "Try to fly like a superman, and you will come down like a tin of soup." Internationally recognised purpose pioneer Thomas Kolster takes a hatchet to his earlier beliefs and warns organisations and leaders to stop putting themselves first when it comes to purpose. Drawing on top-line marketing case studies and in-depth interviews, Kolster demonstrates how people are truly motivated to act when they're in charge of their own life and happiness. 'Who can you help me become?' is the one essential question you need to be asking and acting on to chart a new course for your organisation, changing behaviours at scale and unlocking sustainable growth that benefits all.

**Thomas Kolster** is a marketing activist on a mission to make business put people and planet first. As a seasoned branding and sustainability professional of more than 18 years' standing, he's advised everything from Fortune 500 companies to small start-ups. He's a globally experienced keynote speaker, author of the book *Goodvertising* (2012) and a columnist for Adweek and several other publications. Thomas's belief is simple: change begins with you!

“Most people don’t want better brands – they want a better life and a better world to enjoy it in. In this book, Thomas argues that if organisations want to succeed, they should start with what people need – it’s a great call to action for latent changemakers everywhere!”

**—Joanna Yarrow,**  
*Head of Sustainable & Healthy Living, IKEA*

“People expect more from brands and companies than ever before. Nine of ten consumers say they have a more positive image of a brand or a company when it supports a social or environmental cause and half say they make purchase decisions based on shared beliefs with the brand. That’s why brands today need to be less about themselves and more about serving people in ways that help people contribute to a better world – just by using the brand. With that approach, brands can truly be both a force for good and a force for growth. This premise is exactly what Thomas Kolster talks about in his new book. It’s a must read for today’s brand builders.”

**—Marc Pritchard,**  
*Chief Brand Officer, Procter & Gamble Company*

“Thomas is a bold visionary and purposeful individual – he calls out action and purpose in company culture and promotes authentic cultures that truly help individuals and not simply saying it without action.”

**—Marcello Leone,**  
*CEO, RYU*

# **The Hero Trap**

How to Win in a Post-Purpose Market  
by Putting People in Charge

**Thomas Kolster**

First published 2020  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an  
informa business*

© 2020 Thomas Kolster

The right of Thomas Kolster to be identified as author of  
this work has been asserted by him in accordance with  
sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act  
1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted  
or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic,  
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter  
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any  
information storage or retrieval system, without permission in  
writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be  
trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for  
identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British  
Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Kolster, Thomas, 1978– author.

Title: The hero trap : how to win in a post-purpose market by  
putting people in charge / Thomas Kolster.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge,  
2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019052667 (print) | LCCN 2019052668  
(ebook) | ISBN 9780367242701 (hardback) | ISBN  
9780367242695 (paperback) | ISBN 9780429281457 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Organizational behavior. | Organizational  
change. | Marketing.

Classification: LCC HD58.7 .K644 2020 (print) | LCC HD58.7  
(ebook) | DDC 658.8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019052667>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019052668>

ISBN: 978-0-367-24270-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-24269-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-28145-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Avant Garde  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>About the author</i>	viii
Introduction: change begins with who?	2
1 Me is the new mass	10
2 Catalysts of the good life	32
3 Motivation: the untold story	50
4 The Arrow towards a better you	66
5 The transformative promise	86
6 The WHO void: if not you, who?	108
7 The business case: if not now, when?	130
8 Pass the steering wheel	154
9 The five transformative market forces	170
10 A transformative platform	194
11 Unlocking the potential of all people	214
12 It's time to . . .	232
<i>Appendix</i>	247
<i>References</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	275

# Acknowledgements

## **I promise, I will keep trying.**

Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.

– Thomas Merton, *American Trappist monk and social activist*

## **Thanks for pushing me further**

This book is the fruition of more than three years' challenging work and there are so many people and organisations along the way that I'll be forever thankful because you supported me, inspired me and believed in me. There were also countless people who didn't, but here it is: love or hate the book, but don't ignore it! Love, gratefulness and *tusind tak* (Danish: "thanks a lot") in no specific order of appearance: Mum, Dad, my brother, Klara (Keep inspiring the next gen!), Indy, B. Joseph Pine II, Saša Leben, Mojca Randl, Henry Mason, Martin Nørgaard Furze, all the hospitable people at uitchiscratch, Octavia Francis, the whole team at Trendwatching, Alex Batchelor, Didem Sekerel Erdogan, Luca Petruzzellis, Bari University, Maria Dalskov, Alexander Silva Lopera, Greta Valvonytė, Dorte Gjerrild, Søren Christensen, Justin Kirby, Radu Nechifor, Saba Nejatollahi (again), Sally Phelps, Hend Raafat, Elena Rodriguez Benito, Jacqueline Lew, Nicolas Fuhr, Virginie Helias, Koann Skrzyniarz, John Izzo, Mathias Birkvad, Christiane Dolva, Joanna Yarrow, Jonathan Yohannan, Cyrus Wadia, Marc Pritchard, Marie de la Croix, Ulrik Feldskov Juul, David Hall, Dave Hakkens, Marcello Leone, Maja Rosenstock, Søren Ejlersen, Valérie Hernando-Pressé, Daniel Lubetzky, Michael Lee, John Schoolcraft, Jaime Pla, Jukka Peltola, Tom Daly, Max Vallot, all the inspiring people at Sustainable Brands, Etienne White, Christine Bihlet, Valentina Mazzoli and Luigi Piper from the University of Bari, Will Gilroy, Marie Risum Stryhn, Martin Jørgensen, Edel Rodriguez, Michael Langhoff, Mathias Wikström, Ines Gergoric, my freelance editor Tree Elven, Paul White (again), Barbara Kutscher, Siena Parker and everyone at my publisher. If your name is not here, it should've been: I say thank you nonetheless from the bottom of my heart.

## **Cover artwork by Edel Rodriguez**

I met Edel at an event in Prague and his work instantly struck a chord with me. I couldn't wait to find a project where we could work together. Edel has helped translate my words into a simple, iconic cover. Forever grateful.

## **Illustrations by Martin Jørgensen**

I've known Martin since we both worked at the ad agency DDB in Copenhagen. His pen has shaped the visual storytelling throughout the book and I'm thankful for his time and effort. If you like any of the nine quirky chapter introduction portraits by Martin, you can get your own poster here: [martin-j.dk](http://martin-j.dk).

## **Behind the title**

Naming this book was like naming a child. Honestly, just take a look at this long list of almost-there, could-be, maybes before I finally settled on one title. Guess that's part of the lifelong struggle of creating anything. Embrace trying.

Change in a heartbeat; No lip service; Superbrand is dead; Buying means less, being is everything; From living bigger to living better; A war on self-actualisation; Dear brand, challenge me; Pass the recipe; Pass the starter pistol; Brand catalysts; Butterfly brands give people wings; It's people's business; Honestly, this is for my own sake; From reaching people where they are to reaching who they are; The untold story of what truly motivates us; The untold carrot story; To the best I can be; Brands do not matter, people matter; If not you, who?; Nothing beats the finish line; Nothing beats, I did it; Done is best; In your customers' shoes; Walking in your customers' mind; The catalyst; The power of clay elephants; The great human potential; Finding your own stick and carrot; Empowerability; The perfect human being; Flawless being; Possible being; Change starts with who?; Caterpillar brands; Butterfly brands; The butterfly trigger; Life triggers; Breaking better; The personal code; The change diary; Ask who; Pass the steering wheel; and Post-purpose.

# About the author

## Hi, let's create change together!

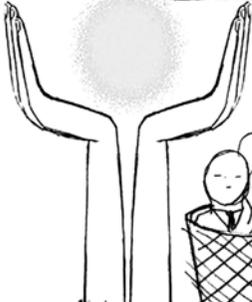
Thomas Kolster is a marketing activist on a mission to make business put people and planet first. As a seasoned branding and sustainability professional of more than 18 years' standing, he's advised Fortune 500 companies, small start-ups, governments, agencies and non-profits. He's the founder of the global Goodvertising movement that's inspired a shift for the better in advertising. He's also the author of two books: *Goodvertising* (2012) and the one you're holding in your hands now.

He's an internationally recognised keynote speaker who's appeared in more than 70 countries at events like TEDx, SXSW, D&AD and Sustainable Brands. He is a columnist for the *Guardian*, *Adweek*, *The Drum* and several other publications, as well as a regular judge at international award shows such as Cannes Lions and D&AD. As a passionate entrepreneur and change agent, he's launched several impact platforms like Cph:Change and Wheregoodgrows. Thomas's belief is simple: change begins with you!

**[thomaskolster.com](http://thomaskolster.com)**



THOMAS  
KOLSTER

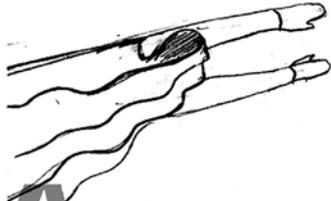


the HERO TRAP





The Hero TRAP



HERO TRAP

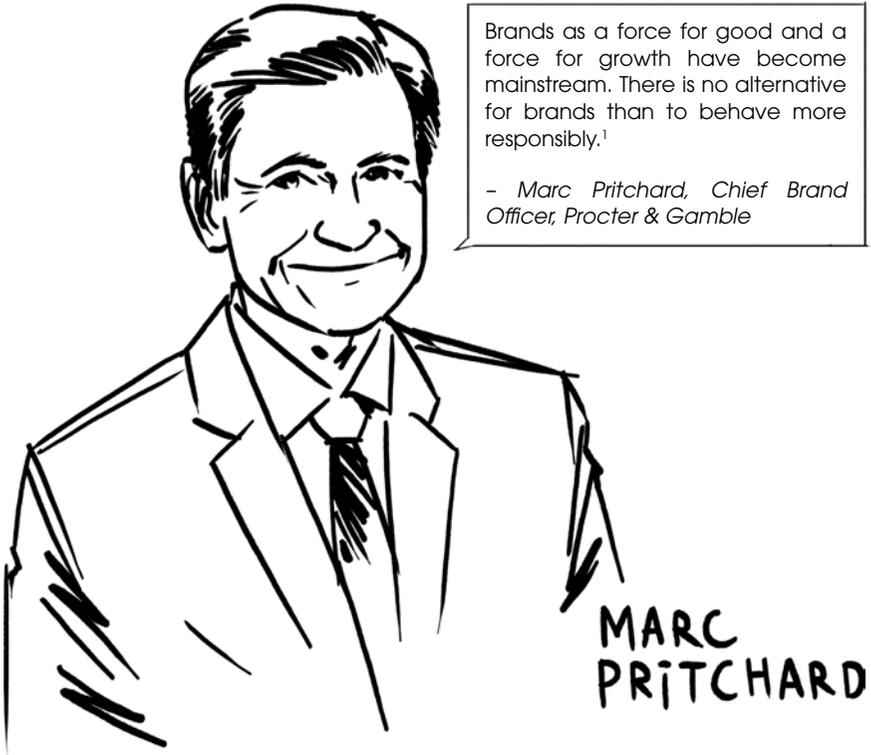


Hero TRAP/



# **Introduction**

Change begins with who?



### **Life is a labyrinth: it's easy to lose focus**

I was wrong about purpose. All these years I had been asking the wrong questions. Let me ask you this: who do you want to be? And I'm not talking about that inquisitive question from your mother or dad, when you as a child could simply say fireman, pilot or doctor. I'm talking about "who" you see yourself as becoming. "Who" do you aspire towards being? "Who" embodies a good life for you? It can be smaller "who's" or roles in your life, like a more considerate boyfriend or girlfriend, a better vegan chef or a better runner, right up to passions like a hotshot creative director, a skydiver or simply a great mum or dad to your children. We all go through life struggling to find our "who."

Often, we lose focus on what's important in our lives, or we prioritise wrongly; the same can be said about marketing and building purposeful brands. Our dreams, fears and aspirations are the building blocks of great, long-living brands that matter to people. The organisations that get this are touching the very core of people's being, the very top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs - people's urge to fulfil themselves through sports, arts, work or whatever rocks their boat. Think of the sense

of safety you feel when driving a Volvo: you are a responsible mom or dad. Or think about the unhindered creativity when working on an Apple MacBook: you are truly a creative. It's not about the product, it's about who you become.

Admittedly it's easy to get lost in the fast-paced world of marketing, with all the talk of artificial intelligence (AI), digital transformation, real time and whatever else is trending, but the answer is right in front of you – people. Yes, people like you and me. In a post-consumerist society, the cost of ignoring people's urge to reach self-fulfilment is brutal and, in most instances, fatal. It's time to refocus. Market economists have made us believe we're driven by green bills or status, but the inherent human truth that goes across age, culture and gender uncovers a stronger force: we want to be in charge of our own lives and our own happiness. You're truly motivated to act when you're calling the shots or chasing that dream. The organisations that get this win by making people become more, do more.

## **My own story of transformation**

In my early twenties, I started working as a copywriter in an ad agency in Denmark. I liked writing and I guess I always had a creative edge, but I didn't feel a burning purpose, and quite bluntly, I was getting paid for what most of the time seemed like a hobby. But something within me didn't feel right. It took me the better part of ten years of advertising agency life – from copywriter to creative director to owner of an agency – to realise that I had to change.

It wasn't an easy journey and, in hindsight, it probably wasn't even a conscious one. More of a spontaneous outburst, a rallying cry against my industry and the unhinged capitalism and consumerism it stood for but, maybe more importantly, an alignment of my work life and my values.

My wake-up call happened when politicians from all over the world gathered in my hometown of Copenhagen in 2009 to agree on a climate treaty to curb rampaging carbon emissions. I had high expectations because all the big guns of politics were there: Merkel, Obama, Sarkozy, Blair, Putin. But as you know . . . nothing happened.

Frustrated, I couldn't help but think that I'm selling cars, burgers and quick loans people really don't need. How can I make a difference? How can I make marketing people realise that their voice and work truly matter in shaping a better world? How can I make them realise that creativity and communication are powerful tools that can be used to serve human and planetary betterment?

My mission was shaped, and it formed the springboard for my first book, *Goodvertising* (Thames & Hudson, 2012). So I slowly developed

## 6 Introduction

a voice and a conviction, which was ultimately to give others a voice, give others a platform. I grew from feeling I was getting paid to use my passion and creativity on something I didn't believe in to waking up energised and ready to spark change.

### From “Why” to “Who”

I've been in the hurricane's eye of the purpose revolution the last decade and have been a vocal advocate. Today, I've lost my belief in putting organisations or leaders on that purpose pedestal rallying for change. If you try to fly like superman, you'll fall like a can of soup. If we are to create change, we have to put people first. I'll argue that organisations have to chart a different course, where they instead help people to follow through on their needs and their ambitions in life. It's a move from “why” your organisation matters in the world to understanding how you as an organisation can help me to achieve “who” I want to be: making me matter. It's a move from being a self-obsessed evangelist to a real leader. We're at a tipping point, and although a sustainable narrative is becoming more commonplace, there is still far to go in pushing people to live better, more sustainable lives. This can only happen if organisations truly motivate people to act.

#### **A real change story about personal development**

No parental supervision. Lower middle-class family.  
Had to be brave enough to change majors after 3.5 years of study.<sup>2</sup>

*- Rich Faber, Innovation Manager at Fortune 250  
Company, on Quora.com*



## Great leaders make you grow

Michael Jackson hit the nail on the head in the classic hit song “Man in the Mirror”: “*I’m starting with the man in the mirror, I’m asking him to change his ways.*”<sup>3</sup> No doubt about it, we are our own biggest enemies of change. That’s why organisations should look to people as the agents of change. Everyone has the potential to change at any point in his or her life, from small goals like eating healthier to bigger aspirations like living with your heart first. We just need the right motivation. Very few organisations have been able to bridge the purpose gap and get people to move from buying in to the purpose to actually buying the product or changing behaviours for the better. The intention is there, but action doesn’t follow. Through years of advising leaders and organisations on purpose, I finally realised what the missing link was: the very people you are supposed to serve and consequently motivate. I looked to coaching methodologies and psychotherapy to understand how to move people from inaction to action, from unfulfilled to fulfilled. One simple but essential question helped spark the needed change: “Who can you help me become?” When you dare to ask “who,” you motivate people to make that jump across their own personal gap from aspiration to action. You become a gardener of change and prepare the soil for people’s growth. Ultimately, you have to help people grow – not directly control or lead them. You have to light a fire in everyone not by passing it on but by helping them to make it! The best leaders I have come across in my life have been those who made me grow, who made me better. The “why” of an organisation has to be found in the individual’s “who.”

Mass-marketing, mass-production and the other “masses” are dying, as people are gaining control. Organisations are faced by smaller, more agile challengers, and there are plenty of those – potentially eight billion ordinary people armed with great ideas and a burning passion, Davids with a sling. Across industries, the big players, the Goliaths, have felt the impact, and some have been brought down. It’s the many Davids who are taking over the very creation of marketing, the very creation of business. It’s unavoidable to put people first.

## The transformation toolbox: begin with “who”

I want to set a new agenda for leadership, a new agenda for brand growth going forward, that’s bottom-up, inclusive, diverse, democratic, sustainable, open, life improving – everything that’s so far from how organisations, businesses or marketing programs traditionally behave.

My goal is to write a practical, hands-on book, one that’s not just left on the bookshelf to gather dust but is being applied again and again to

## 8 Introduction

transform people, organisations and leaders. It's goal oriented. A book that enables you – and your stakeholders. We all need a friendly push from behind sometimes, that reminder not to leave going for that run till tomorrow. Your “push in the back” for crafting organisations that are not dumb, irrelevant, self-centric or outright harmful is now. I believe that together we can create a wave of change for happier, life-improving growth, and it all begins with truly putting people in charge of their own change. The aim of this book is to provide you with the tools for that transformation, and it begins with that one simple question: Who can you help people become?



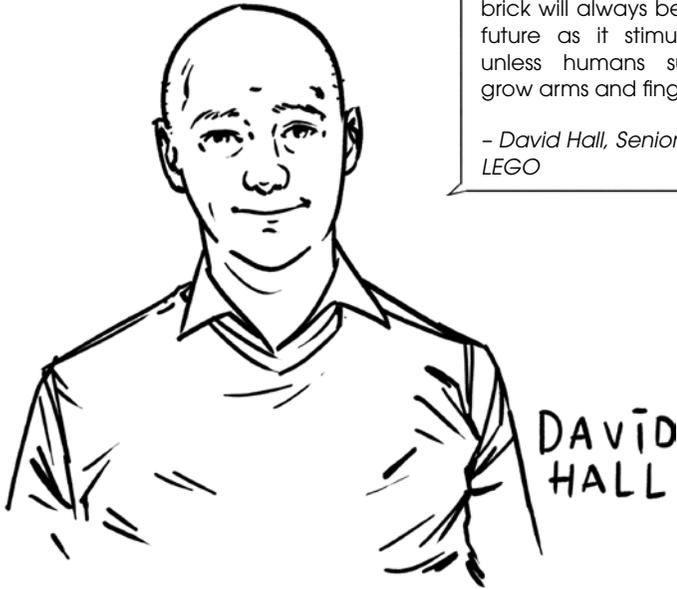
# 3 Motivation

The untold story

**BE THE CHANGE!**

**GET THE WHOLE BOOK AT [THOMASKOLSTER.COM](http://THOMASKOLSTER.COM)  
OR JOIN ONE OF OUR MASTER CLASSES, WEBINARS  
OR TRAININGS**





We believe that the physical LEGO brick will always be relevant in the future as it stimulates creativity, unless humans suddenly didn't grow arms and fingers.<sup>1</sup>

- David Hall, Senior Director, Brand, LEGO

## The IKEA effect

In 1956, Swede Gillis Lundgren was working at IKEA, which at the time was selling big, bulky furniture through mail-order catalogues. Obviously, furniture was expensive and demanding to ship, especially then. One day Gillis was heading to a photo shoot to take pictures of a new table called the Lovet, but he had difficulties cramming the leaf-shaped table into his small car, and he was said to mutter: "*Oh, God, then let's pull the legs off.*"<sup>2</sup> This was the idea that sparked IKEA's flat-pack business model. The flat-pack unintentionally delivered another secret sauce to IKEA's fortune by demanding assembly work from its customers. You've probably cursed at a Billy bookcase or Malm bed when trying to put it together, but there is a bigger lesson to be learned.

In a working paper by Michael I. Norton, Daniel Mochon and Dan Ariely, they describe how students at a university in the Northeast United States were tasked to assemble simple LEGO sets, origami and a piece of IKEA furniture. The study<sup>3</sup> showed that the participants placed higher value on their self-assembled creations and expected others to do the same - an increased valuation the researchers called the "IKEA effect," which was both apparent among Mac-Gyver-do-it-yourself participants and participants with little interest in handiwork.<sup>4</sup> If the task was too difficult or not finalised, the effect

didn't materialise. The study shows how we simply value products higher when we successfully have invested our energy and time into them. Think about the business model behind toy giant Build-a-Bear that asks children to make their own teddy bears and charge people a premium for that little kick of creation. Adding a heart and giving the new furry family member a name finalises the labour of love that goes into creating a Build-a-Bear. You probably know that feeling of satisfaction or bond from when playing a part in the creation of something yourself.

It's time to unleash the IKEA effect and give people a chance to realise themselves through your organisation, through the brand and through the marketing mix. Great organisations don't just sell people the product. Or teach them how to use it. They help them become the best they can be. Social media turns every update into evidence of how healthy, smart, creative, travelled and entrepreneurial we are. It's less about what I *have*, which can easily be bought, and more about *who* I am and my achievements.

## The best I can be

There's a saying that money can't buy happiness. The beauty cream promising you eternal, smiling youth, the car projecting a picture-perfect happy family or the shoe brand trying to make you feel good about yourself by donating a second pair to impoverished communities are increasingly falling on deaf ears because what we ultimately buy is in transition. In their book *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (2007), B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore – the authors who coined the term "Experience Economy" – lay out four distinct economic periods, each defined by our reason to buy:

<p><b>Agrarian economy:</b> access to reliable supply (Availability) <b>Industrial economy:</b> cost (Affordability) <b>Service economy:</b> quality (Performance) <b>Experience economy:</b> conforming to self-image (Authenticity)</p>
---

Let me break each of these different periods down around a product I personally love: coffee. Coffee illustrates the value-added in each single step from a resource-based economy to an experience economy and how it's not the coffee bean at around one dollar a pound but the service or ultimately the experience that raises the price of a cup of coffee to often exorbitant levels.

## **The agrarian economy**

The agrarian economy was an agriculturally based economy where farm produce was traded. Back then, you would buy the coffee beans, roast them and make the coffee from scratch in dedicated coffee houses, some of which date back to the 15th century in the Middle East.

## **The industrial economy**

The industrial economy is an industrial-based economy where manufacturers make standardised products in high quantities. This is coffee advertised and delivered to the mass-market pre-roasted, grounded, packaged and ready for use at home.

## **The service economy**

The service economy works around on-demand, customised service. A good example would be the rampant rise in the takeaway coffee culture, where you pay for a service such as, in this example, convenience.

## **The experience economy**

The experience economy is an experience-based economy where it's about creating outstanding personal experiences. As a knowledgeable coffee drinker, I'm no longer interested or satisfied with a commoditised bland product or service. I want the experience and brand to reflect who I am and what I'm willing to pay for that. An example could be gourmet coffee places where the coffee is roasted and ground in front of your eyes and the brewing is almost a molecular science.

As an example, Starbucks revamped in 2014 some of their outlets in the United States to better reflect the community, local corner store experience that launched the brand to success rather than the uniform, commoditised experience you're being met with in most markets. Starbucks realised there was too high a price to pay for lowering costs and offering convenience because what people really wanted was a community-led, local experience. This is also a testament to why most people buy coffee: it's a social ritual.

## **From sensational experiences to transforming people**

Gilmore and Pine argued that we're in the experience economy and that the most prevalent reason for buying is to conform to one's self-image. You seek out like-minded brands following the dictum: I like that, I am like that. You're the sort of guy who values your family's safety and

well-being, so you drive a Volvo. Or you might be the adventurous, the sky-is-the-limit type of guy working around the clock, so you grab a Red Bull. It's a reason to buy above affordability or quality; it's about how it reflects on you as a buyer: is this really who I am?

An example used in their book tells the story of Disney and how the brand successfully transformed its animated film success on the screen into a tightly choreographed three-dimensional story-driven experience where audiences were transformed into participants. From Disneyland to its high street stores, every little touch point is designed as if were it a scene in a movie.

We are no longer passive consumers of products but active participants. And if you've ever been to Disneyland, you would know from the price tag that people are willing to pay for those experiences. Interestingly enough, Pine and Gilmore don't stop at the experience economy. They believe that we're seeing a fifth economic system developing: the transformation economy.

**Agrarian economy:** Access to reliable supply (Availability)

**Industrial economy:** Cost (Affordability)

**Service economy:** Quality (Performance)

**Experience economy:** Conforming to self-image (Authenticity)

**Transformation economy:** A transformational advantage (Self-actualisation)

Whereas the experience economy was about creating sensations and memorable events, these don't last on a day-to-day level, and Pine & Gilmore argue that in the transformation economy it's about creating lasting change by transforming people and helping them become "*healthy, wealthy or wise.*" When you offer a transformational advantage, you're moving away from a commoditised or easily imitated market promise. It's about helping people. There is a permanent beneficial gain for people. Take the app Blinkist that turns leading professional books into 15-minute knowledge infusions to keep people on their toes or when Nike launched the Nike+ app in 2016, pushing runners to new heights, and called it a "new area of sports – the era of personalised performance." It's a difference people can feel.

In the transformation economy, Pine argues the primary buying criterion will be: edification. As an organisation, one should aspire to transform or change people towards a desired state of mind. This corresponds to the very top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: self-actualisation. Maslow described this level as "*the desire to accomplish everything that one*

*can, to become the most that one can be.*"<sup>5</sup> This emerging shift is very much aligned with the research I described in an earlier chapter from Sitra, where trendsetters increasingly are buying what was dubbed a "better me."

To stay with the coffee analogy, self-actualisation is exactly what the earlier mentioned example of the bicycle coffee chain Wheelys is offering. Wheelys turns people into the coffee maker to discover and express their love for coffee while running their own business. When you're in the transformation economy, the experience, product or service moves to the background and the organisation can charge for the demonstrated outcomes people achieve, like better health, finance, skills or even freedom. Wheelys is essentially selling freedom to passionate entrepreneurs, taking a transformational approach to its business.

### **What does personal growth cost?**

I'll give you a personal example. A group of my friends and I was out for dinner and got to discuss the ongoing challenge today's parents have keeping their little darlings away from being glued to a digital screen 24/7. One of my friends described how his daughter had tried everything from tennis to swimming, but nothing kept her interest for long. Finally, she found something she really liked: ballet. The issue with ballet classes is that they come at a steep price, but my friend argued that he would welcome any opportunity to get her away from the screen and developing new interests. In other words, my friend was willing to pay a premium price for his daughter's transformation. You can probably think of similar examples.

Some companies deliver products where personal transformation is at the very business core, such as Headspace, the mindfulness app. Headspace offers a subscription-based service with unlimited access to mindfulness sessions from about \$6 a month. It's good business: Headspace reports an annual revenue of over \$50 million and is valued at around \$250 million.<sup>6</sup>

Other companies position their products as part of a personal transformation, such as eyewear company District Vision. The company sells eyewear to runners but sees its offerings as part of a much bigger issue: "*mental wellbeing is the foundation of every form of physical exercise.*"<sup>7</sup> The brand helps runners couple performance and mindfulness, a position that sets them apart from other players in the running eyewear market and enables them to price their products at a premium.

### **Better product or better me?**

The role of brands is changing away from the transactional relationship where you as a consumer saw the brand as an extension and you could buy into that self-image: "*I like that, I am like that.*" Essentially, you

bought an image, or a certain way people should perceive you. The classic movie *American Psycho*, portraying a wealthy New York City investment banking executive, Patrick Bateman (played by Christian Bale), sliding into a perverted, murderous world describes in meticulous detail the nineties obsession with buying an image: “he turns around and straightens his Versace tie ready to face whoever. Courtney opens the door and she’s wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweet skirt and silk-satin d’Orsay pumps from Manolo Blahnik.”<sup>8</sup>

It’s a powerful picture of the time, but today it’s not enough for an organisation to deliver on people’s “identity” or “who they are,” but they’ll increasingly have to enable people’s desire for acting to make things better from self-growth, better relationships, taking care of themselves to taking care of our community or planet. Organisation should not just reflect who we are but enable us to become better.

A couple of years back, I joined a cross-fit gym in Copenhagen; I believed it could supercharge my fitness level. Guess I bought into the marketing hype that was touted as the exercise the actors from the film *300* went through. If you haven’t seen the movie, it’s like a Greek war myth meeting Magic Mike. Those barely clad Greek warriors were seriously pumped. I attended the classes a couple of times and admittedly they were tough, but what turned me away was that for the other cross-fitters, this was simply not about a quick fix. It felt more like I had entered a religious sect or was part of an ancient Greek ritual. One time, the whole class had to do 100 push-ups as a punishment because I quit in the middle of a “let’s-smack-a-car-tire-with-a-sledgehammer-exercise.”

I’d thought this was yet another fitness subscription I passively could buy into, but no. The brand – the community – demanded more of me. In this case, I wanted the muscles, not the whole transformation.

## What truly motivates us

There are other incentives for moving from product to experiences to transformation. When looking at what truly motivates us, you might be in for a surprise. Traditional economic understanding promotes the idea that rewards or monetary gain drives motivation, and hence one rewards top performers. We’re brought up with the idea that if we do well in school, we’ll get an A, or if we put extra effort into work, we might get a bonus or a raise. This is what’s called extrinsic motivation, which refers to behaviour that is driven by external rewards such as money, fame, grades and praise.

But what truly motivates us goes against the classic stick-and-carrot approach. When it’s your own choice to do something, you’re more motivated than when somebody tells you do to something or you’re paid to do it. This is an intrinsic motivation because you are self-motivated. It’s when one simply enjoys an activity or sees it as an opportunity to explore, learn or realise a potential as opposed to extrinsic

motivation, which are external factors such as, for example, status. You probably recognise this motivation from yourself. When you decide to do something, even if it's somehow a tedious task like painting the walls white in your apartment, it brings a sense of fulfilment or accomplishment at the end versus if being something you are told to do. Or maybe you recognise this from the workplace? There is nothing more demotivating than a boss behaving like a dictator, giving you little to no say over your workday. Why should this be different when it comes to your organisation's relationship with people? How much of a say do people really have?

When people feel in control and are self-determined, they are more motivated and fulfilled. Studies within social sciences and psychology have been looking to uncover that connection. One such study<sup>9</sup> was conducted in 1985 by Theresa Amabile, a professor at Harvard Business School, among 72 creative writers at Brandeis and Boston University who were tasked with writing poetry. The group was divided into three and given various motives for solving the assignment. The first group was given a number of extrinsic reasons for writing from impressing teachers (status) and cash rewards to getting into graduate school. The second group was given intrinsic reasons for writing, such as the joy of writing, playing with words and an opportunity for self-expression and reflection. The last group was given no brief. The results underscore how we like to be in control over our own lives. The students given extrinsic reasons for writing such as personal gain saw the quality of their writing drop significantly compared to the two other groups. This study and other similar studies in, for example, a work environment clearly indicates that when it comes to mental tasks, complex problem solving, critical or creative thinking, extrinsic rewards have a negative effect on results; we are motivated by selfish reasons. We are not walking piggybanks hungry for coins; we have interests, passions and beliefs driving us – things we want to achieve.

## **Self-determination and how we stay motivated**

Professors Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan have, throughout their careers in psychology, argued for the connection between self-actualisation and motivation. In their Self-Determination Theory<sup>10</sup> the two professors break away from the causality-based view on motivation: "*I do this, because I expect this in return.*" They argue instead that we are in fact: self-determined – or call it self-motivated. For example, I like wave surfing, and while I'm not the best surfer, just being out there on the ocean on my board makes my day. I don't get paid to surf, but I do it because I like to do it. Or take volunteering for example. How can it be that people who already work long hours and get paid to do so still take precious time out of their calendars to clean plastic off a beach?

We actually do surf, volunteer and even pull those extra hours at the office because we do like it; it's in our own interest – we live out our dreams, passions or aspirations through those activities. But imagine if somebody told you to surf or to volunteer. Suddenly that feeling of freedom and self-exploration disappears. What you love suddenly turns into a task. Self-determination, our own ability to determine the outcome, is important for motivation. Who would have guessed that people would value a product like a Billy bookcase higher simply because they assembled it, as the IKEA Effect proved?

We all strive to be independent agents in our life, in control of our own behaviour and setting our own goals. This universal factor is key to explaining how we are intrinsically self-motivated and do things because we want to do them. Unless you are self-motivated and taking control of the change, you rarely succeed, which anyone who's ever tried to quit smoking can tell you. Your doctors can tell you to pack it in, your wife and kids can try to motivate you, ads on the packaging can scare you to quit, but, at the end of the day, you need to make that conscious decision yourself.

### **A real change story about family**

I kept inviting my 80-year-old grandmother to visit me in Copenhagen, but she always declined, because she didn't want to feel as a burden. Admittedly her legs, eyes and ears don't work that well any more. I kept insisting because I wanted her to overcome the challenge. My grandmother trained each day for several months to get as fit as possible and took the challenge to fly by herself. We had some slow connecting time only with each other, navigating through space and time, comparing past and present. But the best thing is that she wanted to visit me next spring for the Sakura Fest. She doesn't count herself as a burden anymore. YAS!!<sup>11</sup>

– Greta Valvonytė, *Space and Sustainability Enthusiast*



## **Motivating people to change**

In a Scandinavian Airlines magazine from February 2019, I read about travel trends and came across the story of Camilla Elden, a 30-year-old social media influencer from Oslo in Norway. Like many others in her generation, she felt the Internet and social media had taken over her life, and she decided to go on a three-day digital detox sailing trip in Northern Norway. On the trip she realised how great it was to disconnect from the digital world, and when she came back, she established a rule not to use her phone an hour before going to bed. It's a small change, but one by which the cruise is helping transform Camilla from "*who she is*" to "*who she wants to become*." That's a transformation worth paying for.

The magazine shared other stories about how travel changes people as part of Scandinavian Airlines' efforts to convey a story about the bigger role the airline plays in people's lives. As part of a study into travel trends in Scandinavia, the airline discovered that a majority of their customers believed travelling gave them more knowledge, new ideas and a more global mindset. In late 2018, Scandinavian launched a campaign called "Arrivals," where you witness a documentary-style portrayal of the arrival hall in an airport and how people arrive changed from their travels by having discovered new love to new ideas to becoming more mature. Scandinavian Airlines's claim that travel changes us is borne out of the research, and it's a position that sets them apart from their competitors in the industry typically talking about price, services or destination. Going forward, it'll be exciting to see whether they expand this approach across the marketing mix, such as to services or new products, and whether they'll be able to convey this story in an even more compelling way.

## **Give people the remote control**

Enabling individuals to take control has not been the traditional modus operandi in marketing, business or for that sake in leadership, which is typically hierarchical, centralised and carefully choreographed. There's probably nothing as angst-provoking as to let go of that power and control. After all, if you're a marketer, the million- or billion-dollar brand value is your responsibility. Or maybe, if you're the content creator tasked with the storytelling, how can you possibly let loose and trust an online community dominated by trolls? We've all seen what happens when you free the trolls, right? It's actually one of my pastime activities - looking for online trolls - when I need time out from writing. I pick a random political story at any major news network and read the comments. I don't know if I should laugh or cry. If you are ever in doubt whether people want to invest time in things they care about, then just

scroll down and look at the comments. Okay, undeniably most of the time I laugh.

You probably don't think about how your organisation tries to dominate the relationship. Think for a minute about the power companies convey. How they dominate almost every medium from TV and digital to our cityscape with their brands and messages. Or how they want to take control over the customer experience.

I remember to this day when I went to open my first savings account as a kid. My mum made sure I had nice clothes on, shirt stuck into the pants, wearing those odd old man leather shoes, the curls wet and carefully combed down. Arriving at the bank didn't make me feel less at odds. Banks always have these high ceilings where, as soon as you enter, you feel insignificant. An architect friend told me this is a common design feature of most corporate HQs – they're designed to make you feel unimportant and insecure as you arrive. Designed to exhort power. That day, that's exactly how I felt.

I went to the cashier and, after going through all the hoops, the checks and balances, the paperwork, signing documents, I deposited the money, and by then I felt like the bank was doing me a favour of letting me deposit my money rather than me being a valued customer. Is this really how a customer experience should be? Before I left the bank, I was given a small booklet. As I got outside, I started to cry. My mum and dad, embarrassed by the onlookers, tried to comfort me, but nothing helped. My dad lost patience and angrily asked, "*What's wrong?*" And I told them I was crying because I thought I paid all my savings for that little booklet. I didn't realise that the booklet was simply my account statement. I felt utterly powerless.

It's really not a surprise that banks rank at the top of the charts for the most hated industries by Millennials.<sup>12</sup> Or think about phone companies or gym memberships with all their contractual bindings and legal blurbs in small writing that, you know, is going to screw you over. Again, it is all designed to say, "*We the company are the big guys, you're the little guy.*" In my early advertising career, I worked for a Danish challenger gym brand called Fitness World, which went up against the major players in the market with a simple preposition: one fixed membership fee, no binding, no small prints. In a matter of three years, it became the market leader thanks to a transparent, no bullshit approach.

Relive your last retail experience. I observe on a daily basis how brands treat me like just another one in line or as a number rather than as a beloved customer or individual. The other day, I was at a high-end bakery that charges up to double the amount of other bakeries in the neighbourhood for bread and cakes, yet still I have to pull a number and wait in line. It might seem like an insignificant detail, but it does reveal how I'm perceived or valued as a customer: just another number or "*Hey, Thomas, how are you? The usual?*"

## **That tree-hut building joy**

The motivational effects of having a say or being in control have thoroughly been studied in terms of performance and satisfaction. While traditional advertising offers little to no interaction, digital opens up unlimited possibilities to interact with people or maybe even get them to take part in a campaign or parts of a campaign.

One study<sup>13</sup> I want to share is by Christoph Fuchs, Emanuela Prandelli and Martin Schreier called "The Psychological Effects of Empowerment Strategies on Consumers' Product Demand." The study looks at what happens when a company makes people democratically decide what products to launch. The study was carried out on 264 undergraduate students from four parallel classes at a European university. The students were given different design options for T-shirts similar to the online designer community Theadless.com (if you know that site?). Afterwards, the students were asked to democratically choose which T-shirts should be produced. The results of the empirical test showed that the students who could select the products to be marketed showed a stronger demand for that exact product. The students simply developed a stronger psychological ownership of the T-shirts that they themselves had a say in producing. This is different from the IKEA effect, where the participants had no say in shaping the product, but the increased valuation came down to the fact that the participants themselves were crafting and building.

Either way, both studies demonstrate that, when you've invested time, love, work or opinions in something, you care more about it. I guess we all know that feeling whether it's at work doing a project or at home when building a tree hut for the children.

## **Time to act!**

For an organisation or leader this is an opportunity to build a different relationship with people, from being an evangelist trying to impose your way of thinking to someone who helps people achieve their goals or discover new sides of themselves. I keep reiterating this point. Sorry, organisations: when you know you're powerless or defenceless, it becomes even more pathetic or ridiculous to insist on your power. You might remember the film *Monty Python's Holy Grail* (1975)? In one scene, King Arthur played by Graham Chapman is riding towards the Holy Grail, and the Black Knight played by John Cleese suddenly blocks his journey. A bloody but quick sword battle ensues, leaving the in-his-own-opinion "invincible" Black Knight without any limbs and clearly defeated. King Arthur leaves behind the limb-less Black Knight, but the Knight is not ready to give up and shouts: "*Running away, eh? You yel-low bastards! Come back here and take what's coming to ya! I'll bite*

your legs off!”<sup>14</sup> So, unless you want to subscribe to the reality of the fable, “If you never give up, you can’t possibly lose,” it’s time to act.

Everybody is on a search for meaning. For most people, it might not yet be discovered or clearly stated; it could be a flimsy idea, it could be set in stone. But for anyone to ever believe that our fellow friends, colleagues and family members don’t have a goal in their lives, or aspirations or dreams, is a degrading misconception. It’s more likely that you might not understand or empathise with his or her life-goal-in-progress. You never want to underestimate people’s aspirations. And there are many triggers behind motivation, from extrinsic like those most marketing has played on, such as status or acceptance, to intrinsic like our curiosity to learn or develop, but no matter the trigger or the motivation, there is an untapped potential for organisations and leaders in motivating people to reach those personal goals.

The result can be felt rather than being a marketing sales pitch or a lofty corporate purpose statement. Twitter user @ClaireMarkhamFH wrote in the beginning of 2019 about the reading app Blinkist: “Excited about today’s #Blinkist by Stephen Hawking. Roll on lunchtime.” The excited Twitter user couldn’t wait to learn, thanks to Blinkist. This is heaven for any organisation wanting to make a meaningful difference in people’s lives.



### **Key takeaways**

- 1 There is a gap between people’s formulated intent to buy from purposeful organisations and their actions.
- 2 Stakeholders are becoming an organisation’s licence to operate, but most organisations get lost in their corporate purpose rather than enabling people to realise their own goals, aspirations and dreams.
- 3 The market is shifting from an experience economy where it’s about value alignment with people to a transformation economy where it’s about making people’s lives better across body and mind.
- 4 When looking to motivate people, self-determination beats sticks and carrots.
- 5 When you give people a greater say or more control, they value your product or services more.



**Questions to ask yourself**

- 1 Do you feel an increased pressure for interaction from your stakeholders?
- 2 Do your product or service ultimately transform people's lives?
- 3 Are you experiencing a different demand from people towards personal transformation, such as better health, finance or skills?
- 4 Does your organisation use rewards to drive motivation internally or externally?
- 5 Do your products or services offer any possibility for people to interact?



**BE THE CHANGE!**

**GET THE WHOLE BOOK AT [THOMASKOLSTER.COM](http://THOMASKOLSTER.COM)  
OR JOIN ONE OF OUR MASTER CLASSES, WEBINARS  
OR TRAININGS**



## **12 It's time to . . .**

In a capitalist world that's so much about excess, it's about time for companies to chart a different path that's about human enlightenment. The last frontier in purpose - how can we achieve the inner betterment of people? If we don't succeed with improving our minds and behaviours, we won't succeed with the greater challenge of discovering better ways of living in our communities and in society at large.<sup>1</sup>

- Tom Daly and Max Vallot, Co-founders,  
*District Vision*



### **Safe return doubtful**

"*Men wanted,*"<sup>2</sup> reads the headline of the often quoted ad that British explorer Ernest Shackleton allegedly printed in the *Times* in 1913. It continues, "*for hazardous Journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honour and recognition in case of success.*"

More than a century later, the job advert still hits the spot because it speaks to a universal human aspiration. In an uncertain business environment, the only certainty is our humanity, our human physiology and psyche. And as a species, we're the dominating force on our planet, shaping its flora and fauna from the deepest trenches in the ocean to our planet's outer layers (by the way, the ozone layer is not saying thank you). We live in a truly anthropogenic period, where humankind

is the all-dominating force. Business is without doubt becoming even more personalised, automated and artificial intelligence led in a desperation to reach us, but it's still undeniably simple. It's all about being human. Don't obsess with the next big thing in technology, but look for the smaller things happening as life goes by day to day.

We all aspire to something. We all get up in the morning wishing today will be better than yesterday. It's a continuous hope for personal transformation, a cornerstone of philosophy and the world's religions. As in the religious story of Adam and Eve, there are plenty of obstacles or snakes in our way, challenging our humanity. For organisations or leaders, this should be a constant burning flame, a transformative promise or North Star: how to help people achieve those dreams or aspirations, or, essentially and simply, how to cope with being human, with all the flaws that entails.

Any organisational structure getting too big loses the sense of the individual and its needs. It's time to recalibrate that focus because the ultimate goal of business is to serve you and me. Never one over the other. I easy to get lost in technology, tools or innovations, all of which are happening with unprecedented speed, but our human limitations and ingenuity are the single constant. It's time to create a human revolution, another human enlightenment, where we strive to bring the best out in our humanity. Toilet musings and grey clay elephants are still the most powerful weapons in business and leadership: embrace those ambitions or fears wholeheartedly, and be insanely inquisitive about people's daily lives.

In the last decade or so, people have been able to explore alternative worlds through gaming, virtual reality, role playing, online connect-edness and digital forums. All individuals can chip in what they believe is a better life and can take part in its ongoing creation. This opens the door for a new, modern interpretation of what life should be like (and the businesses enabling it), based on collaboration and democratic processes – where you have a say rather than submitting to the vision of a single, eccentric tyrant (or organisation). In a transparent, pro-social, democratised marketplace, there's no room for the self-serving, and power is ultimately earned and given by your stakeholders. We as people demand to have a say about the future. After all, it's our future.

## **Advertising is not working for me**

Advertising will be forced to change, and we're already seeing the ramifications. The increasing amount of information that is readily available in more and more aspects of our lives is pushing the frontiers further; in a transparent market, the facts are not as easily distorted or decorated. Personalised data can ultimately lead to better informed decisions, potentially overruling emotions and intuition and nudging

consumers towards their ideal way of living, be that staying healthy and motivated through a tech device like Fitbit or offering your children the most nutritious food. Information delivered by expert recommendations like GoodGuide, real-time comparisons like PriceRunner, consumer labels like the Energy Label or peer-to-peer consumer recommendations will add (and already are adding) more transparency to choices than ever before.

We're just scratching the surface. New technologies will take this information and make it increasingly accessible. Think of, for example, intelligent displays on the shelf (or built into products) recommending you products based on your known preferences or on an analysis of your physical and mental well-being. P&G, Philips and many others are exploring the IoT (Internet of things), where your devices are connected to the Internet, like an Oral-B toothbrush which tracks your toothbrushing and suggests improvements. Organisations need to embrace a rapidly and radically changing world order or be exposed as nothing but screaming quacks selling snake oil who are destined to be chased out of town.

As an organisation, you'll have to give people a reason to opt in to your messages. Retail will inevitably change from being sales channels to multifunctional spaces for community, experiences, exercise and learning. Life is difficult, some will even say it sucks, and the brands that can help people cope will always have a role to play. But this is not about paying lip service to people's self-actualisation or transformation: as you see from the cases we've looked at, it comes down to truly changing behaviours. This puts an unprecedented pressure on organisations to deliver transformational value through brand, service and product – and isn't this in reality what the capitalist society should be all about? A competition that improves services and products, propelling us forward, rather than a beauty contest based on incremental or advertised made-up differences, which leaves us stagnating?

There is an enormous energy and potential in unleashing human ambitions, creativity and resources everywhere in society. As marketing and brands are the most influential cultural shaper, there is a significant, mutually beneficial, interdependent role to be explored.

## **Life online and offline is merging**

The expansion of digitalisation into every aspect of our lives can either be one of the greatest possibilities to unlock human ingenuity, collaboration and potential or, as it's quickly becoming, a bloody digital battlefield where commercial interests are mining our data to target us with personalised messages at every corner, like a stalker on electric rollerblades. How free is the Internet, when every Google search is for sale?

Or your social media feed is packed with advertised products instead of your friends' smiling babies and big brown-eyed dogs?

Of course, data can serve humanity and potentially prevent everything from suicides to an overcooked meal, but it's you and I producing the data that supplies the content on Facebook or the blog post on LinkedIn. Yet we have only little to no control over our work or our data – we're sucked into the system, and we're not getting remunerated or heard. As more and more of our time is spent digitally, it's important to have space for us all to freely learn, connect, laugh, love and work online. It's important that we choose who we want to share our data with, just as we choose our friends in the physical world. It's important we get paid for what we produce digitally, especially when others earn on our efforts through ads. We wouldn't put up with working for free at the office, why should we digitally? As an organisation, you cannot ignore these questions. You have to truly enable your community both offline and online. No hidden cookies.

### **Work to live or live to work?**

The search for self-actualisation will only be a stronger driving force as robots, AI, automation and digitalisation are taking over what used to be our most defining role as an individual: our work. Through working with the unemployed, I've witnessed first-hand the damaging effects of how people without a job quickly begin to feel useless or without meaning in life. How does one find meaning outside of work? Switzerland was the first nation to put forward a vote for citizen pay in 2016. The idea is that every citizen should receive a benefit from the state, whether they have a job or not. The notion was unsuccessful as the vote didn't get enough support.

In 2017,<sup>3</sup> Finland launched a two-year trial among 2,000 unemployed people aged 25 to 58 in which they received a monthly payment of €560 with no obligation either to seek or accept employment. In the test, even employed people received the same amount. The trial didn't push more people into work, but it did raise satisfaction levels among the unemployed.

The social consequences of digitalisation can be brutal. It's estimated that by 2030, 80% of households in United States and Japan will own robots for elderly care, personal assistance and companionship. When work is not defining you in society, people will increasingly look to realise themselves through creativity, through friendships or maybe through mindfulness?

In ancient Greece, the rich aristocrats had plenty of time on their hands, as slaves and servants were taking care of their basic needs. This sparked an upheaval in philosophy, politics and arts, laying the

groundwork for our modern society and an aspiration towards the ideal body and mind. Are we seeing a similar quest for the perfect life, for human enlightenment, in our own times?

## **The future of better me**

As technology and biology morph, our minds and bodies are no longer a limitation to self-actualisation. And today, we're just scratching the surface.

We can upgrade our bodies' functionality: Swedish train service SJ allows people to use biometric implants as tickets; artist Neil Harbisson, who was born colour-blind, invented The Human Antenna to transpose colours to vibrations using a simple head-mounted camera extension. Or take a simple everyday example: think about how our concept of knowledge has changed since all the world's knowledge is simply one click away. We don't need to know all the world's countries by heart or the periodic table.

Our ideas about education have changed too, as we now have the capacity to embark on a lifelong educational journey, learning the skills to think critically rather than relying on established knowledge, structures and professions.

In the intersection between tech and self-improvement, new players are emerging all the time, utilising VR, AR or AI to help people realise their goals. Indian start-up Boltt is combining wearable devices in shoes and wristbands to track personal data and through an AI-powered personal coach offering real-time advice across multiple self-improvement areas from fitness and nutrition to sleep.

And where our bodies are holding us back from achieving more, body hackers are pushing the boundaries and exploring new ways to fuse technology and biology, raising ethical questions and sparking an organisation such as the Cyborg Foundation, set up to protect soon-to-be cyborg rights. It's like a cycle race, but instead of performance-enhancing drugs, the whole body and mind make up the canvas for hacking and improving. Brace yourself for a fast-as-lightning Cyborg Lance Armstrong! There are exciting possibilities for those who dare to dream big on people's behalf when neither body nor mind seems to be a barrier for ingenuity – as long as we can work out how to answer the acute ethical questions involved.

## **Transforming whom?**

Sadly, economic growth still rules: it's an utterly perverse fact that the world's eight richest people (Bill Gates, Amancio Ortega, Warren Buffett, Carlos Slim Helú, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Larry Ellison and

Michael Bloomberg) on this planet hold the same amount of wealth as the faceless, voiceless poorest half.<sup>4</sup> And big business is getting gargantuan (especially in developed markets) as companies are pushed toward mergers, consolidations, acquisitions and growth. In 2018 (and on the 64th list), Fortune 500 companies represent two-thirds of the United States's GDP.<sup>5</sup> These enormous homogeneous structures make our societies less pluralistic, less diverse, less creative and less resilient as they convey one way of thinking, one way of doing things, one culture, one shopping basket. The potential higher short-term yield of monoculture in business comes with a devastating price on diversity, health and our planet – just as monoculture does when it comes to farming.

According to research by the International Monetary Fund,<sup>6</sup> the result of more power in fewer hands means higher consumer prices and greater corporate markups, with an average upswing of 43% since the 1980s.

The environmental and social implications are a whole other sad story.

People generally hate big business. According to Gallup, Americans continue to show negative attitudes toward big business and prefer small business. Gallup's<sup>7</sup> research from 2017 shows that 70% of Americans have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in small business, more than three times the 21% confidence rating for big business. There is a wealth, trust and power gap that needs to be addressed more seriously, if we are to create a fair and sustainable society – and if you as an organisation want to have a role in our lives going forward.

## **The redefinition of business**

Corporations will eventually have to be redefined. Corporate talk about serving a higher purpose than simply earning money rings hollow if the underlying corporate structure is not truly serving people. Organisations like B-Corps and the cooperative movement are gaining popularity across the globe, and we'll see other corporate structures evolve, potentially posing a real challenge to big business benefiting the privileged few with an empty promise of prosperity for the many.

The unhinged wealth and growth of tech companies – many powered by the very same ideas I talk about in terms of democratising access and turning people into the producers, such as Facebook where we as users make the content – pose fundamental questions to the sustainability of these platforms. As Facebook is equivalent to the biggest country of the world with 1.3 billion users (2018 numbers), how does it guarantee the wealth and well-being of those who actually contribute to its continuous success? And although the philosophical foundation of Facebook has been expressed by Mark Zuckerberg to be all about giving the power back to the community, it quickly ends

up being empty words when the company itself centralises power and wealth in Cupertino, California.

Who should ultimately own Facebook, as it has become a public commons just as Google is in regards to search? Should it be public infrastructure in the digital domain much like a bridge or a hospital? When shareholders snap the whip to maximise profit, how does our collective contribution to the platform become heard? Platforms like Kickstarter with 15 million users have become a B-Corp and pledged to be there for users in the long term rather than cashing in on the stock market, which is a great step, but is it going far enough? When talking about these emerging, transformative organisations, it's difficult not to ask oneself if that can ever truly be realised when the ownership structure is not addressed. Or for that matter, if one can really talk about the concept of "*shared value*," as if a company's stakeholders really get their fair share? Ask the woman in India sewing shoes or a store attendant, if either feels that shared value?

All of these questions are uncomfortable to ask, but this agenda is unstoppable, so it's important we all chip in to find a fair path forward. I'm not talking about some elitist communist pipe dream. The reality of a decentralised system cannot be ignored, breaking down or making old power structures obsolete. People can have a say, and in the political world, there are experiments with direct democracy that will surely eventually influence the leadership of countries as well as companies. Most people pay their fair and equal share of taxes but not companies. The tax question is important as its people's contribution, as well as companies' contribution, to a democratic, prosperous, healthy and fair society.

Ownership will have to be readdressed, and the conversation will quickly turn towards fair, transparent and participatory structures. The sick economic and social divide we're witnessing today is not the answer. Can we really talk about democracy, when even in developed democracies those with money or network have easier access to those in power?

If citizens or stakeholders should be taken seriously, shouldn't everybody owning a stake in the company's or nation's success be valued and heard? From employees to an increasingly participatory citizen or customer?

Being brought up in Denmark, I've witnessed first-hand how equal access to education can benefit society at large – and not just the privileged – because the education system is paid for and supported from kindergarten to university by the Danes' tax contribution. There is no such thing as an American Dream; that's an illusion at best, if it is not supported by equal access to education in order to truly foster social mobility and personal growth. Similarly, business has to be redefined to serve society and all its stakeholders more broadly. Corporate profit

should never capitalise on the health and wealth of stakeholders. I'm not advocating for Utopia; I do believe capitalism has an important role to play. We simply need to rethink how it can universally benefit everyone, and, as our democratic forefathers cried during the French revolution, I believe this comes from equality, fraternity and liberty. Those were words in 1789 that can come true today.

## **Responsibility or possibility?**

Traditionally, organisations have looked at creating higher societal value as a corporate social responsibility, but with rising sustainability challenges facing these organisations, there's been a move away from risk management to chasing new business opportunities. A carmaker today can't ignore the rising urban populations but has to rethink how transportation needs are met.

There is a business opportunity. A lot of these challenges are systemic, which have pushed for increasing collaboration between old competitors. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) opened up new opportunities for organisations to collaborate on issues. Collaboration is in fact SDG number 17. This is an important step in, together, launching efforts and tackling shared challenges.

A study by Accenture for UN Global Compact,<sup>8</sup> the world's largest CEO study on sustainability to date across more than 1,000 top executives from 27 industries and across 103 countries, concludes that: "*Without radical, structural change to markets and systems, CEOs believe, business may be unable to lead the way toward the peak of a sustainable economy.*" In the same survey, 93% of the CEOs responded that sustainability issues are important to very important for the future success of their business. The recognition of action is absolutely there; the million-dollar question is how do we create the change at the speed and scale needed?

## **Power in numbers**

Undoubtedly, we as a society are faced with massive socio-economic and environmental challenges that all call for urgent action. In the book *The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration*,<sup>9</sup> the development is described as an increased acceleration with an exponential rise across urban populations, energy, tourism, forest loss, carbon emissions, water usage, loss of fish stocks . . . and I could go on. This rapid growth will have to be balanced out by an equally swift, large-scale, counter development. Is business suited to meet those challenges and swiftly enough? We definitely shouldn't ignore the billions of people whose lives have to change maybe more dramatically than we right now imagine.

In a report from the Stockholm Resilience Centre from 2018,<sup>10</sup> the challenge is aptly described: “A key challenge lies in the psychology of worldviews. While the adoption of the SDGs is such a positive global act – a true turning point for the entire agenda on world development – we still remain in a world view where ‘Everybody knows, but nobody wants to understand’ the magnitude of the transformation that is needed.” If you want change to happen, it’s about time you make people themselves responsible with a rallying cry of “you create the change.”

We need to fundamentally change our current centralised, feudal-like system which currently creates wealth and power centres benefitting those at the top at a high cost for those at the bottom, rather than enabling prosperous, equal societies.

As we’re increasingly moving towards decentralisation, where everything from energy to food can be produced locally or even by individuals, such as solar energy, the centralised model is under pressure. Old monopolies are trying to hold on to their slipping power grip over food, energy, banking and so on.

In Holland, a scalable city, ReGen Villages, is being built as an attempt to explore a different city structure. ReGen Villages is 100% self-sufficient in energy and 100% self-sufficient in food. What does that potentially mean to the energy companies and the supermarket chains? Or take Blockchain’s so far unsuccessful attempt to challenge the power grip of financial institutions? Is the wolf watching the sheep, or should the sheep be looking out for one another? As an organisation, you can either fight against decentralisation, or you can aim to build platforms to unleash the creativity, skills and resources of the billions – and that’s where I believe change grows in speed and scale.

## **The elephant in the room: consumption!**

One of my bigger beefs with my work in advertising has been the relentless focus on driving consumption: growth, growth and growth at any cost.

In a resource-constrained world, it’s pivotal that we create a new way forward, and younger generations are calling for change. I believe the best way to succeed is by creating change one person at a time rather than overreaching for a Superman-like save-our-planet strategy. Let’s anchor this change on an individual level and bridge the gap between a world bettering aspiration and personal action. There is a reason the New Year’s pledge for most of us ends up being a new start to old, bad habits. You are your own biggest enemy of change.

Today's needs and wants have become too fickle and fast-changing to understand, from a sudden embrace of a plant-based diet, or car ownership being turned on its head, or a love-hate relationship with juice and its natural high-calorie content. Jeff Bezos, Amazon CEO, is obsessed with customers, and his philosophy "*Start with the customer and work backward*"<sup>11</sup> is built into the organisation, from press releases always featuring customer quotes to Amazon meetings reportedly always featuring an empty chair for the customer. Understanding consumption today demands an increasingly customer-centric approach, but I'll go further and claim it's about a life-centric approach.



#### **Four good tips going forward**

1. Always put people's lives, well-being and happiness first.
2. Aim for a transformative promise to put people in charge of the change.
3. Turn people into your innovation and marketing engine.
4. Enable people to go further than they ever could've imagined.

### **Turning people into agents of change**

There is massive untapped potential in companies or any organisation for enabling people to become agents of change towards a better life. Think about it. Fast-consumer-goods conglomerate P&G touches 4.6 billion people daily with their products<sup>12</sup>. Coca-Cola 1.9 billion. Facebook 1.5 billion. Think about the change they can unlock if they can get just every third household in this world to use just a little less water when cleaning dishes or promoting better recycling habits. From Starbucks to Patagonia, companies are becoming louder and more activist, but the real potential for change lies in turning each and every one of us into everyday creators of a better life. Activism most often ends up being counterproductive to change as it is exclusive rather than inclusive. And I definitely think it's counterproductive to the sustainability or climate movement as inclusion is paramount to the change we need. Let's say

you were good at biology in school; you shouldn't point fingers, ridicule or exclude those who didn't get it but rather help. Why do we point fingers at those who still don't act on or get climate change? Changes should never be for the few but for the many. When Google co-founder Sergey Brin,<sup>13</sup> following the election of the divisive US President Donald Trump, spoke about how he was "upset" and "sad" and saw the election as being contrary to Google's values. His reaction sparked outrage because obviously not everyone inside and outside Google shared Sergey's views and instead embraced the new president. For organisations and leaders, taking an activist stand can alienate people. The same obviously goes with the role your organisation wants to play in people's lives. Think about Nike's focus on athletes and performance versus RYU's embracement of whatever people's life goals are. Some people might feel alienated by Nike's focus as they don't feel (or look) like an athlete.

People are sceptical towards organisations and can be even more sceptical about organisations doing a value crusade, interfering in our lives and telling us to do this or that. Nobody likes to be told to smoke less, exercise more, eat less sugar or get out of the house and meet some people! Real leadership is not about being a missionary but about walking behind people and enabling them to make the change. Don't dictate, enable, transform. Always start with WHO you can help me become.

## **Are people the hero?**

"*What's the business case for ending life on earth?*"<sup>14</sup> asks the late Interface founder and sustainability champion Roy Anderson.

Although that is a significant question, you as a leader or an organisation have to begin with people. Not with planet. If you try to save the world, your broad goal will blind you and others, but if you enable one person to make a difference, that person knows five other people that know five other people and so on. The steps of many will turn into a leap for mankind. I'm not saying you shouldn't be allowed to dream *big*, but if you don't succeed in nudging people, the dream might quickly turn into a nightmare – or a hero trap! As an organisation, the change begins with a transformative promise. The running shoes don't run by themselves. The waistline on your pants doesn't shrink automatically. The organic apple doesn't just jump into the shopping basket. Communication is a powerful tool, and, as the unhinged dream machine of advertising promising us greater lives if we consume while nearing the last stop, it's time to unlock real change, real action.

Products designed to become obsolete. An overload of food grown to be thrown away. Superfluous packaging. Explosive amounts of

ignored advertising. Mass-production to mass-media to mass-movements was only a short-term strategy: mass is becoming a losing system. In industrial times, you'd be the low-paid worker doing grinding labour on the assembly line; today you have an opportunity to be your own boss with life's endless possibilities as your factory floor. Everyone is free to converse, do business and find love on their own terms.

Now, what role does your organisation want to play in my life? An organisation that doesn't promise a positive personal or societal benefit is as useless as a clown on a spacecraft. There simply will be few or no organisations without a life bettering promise in a post-capitalist world; the question is simply who's getting it right?

In my dialogue with all these different transformative businesses, from Wheelys Café to IKEA, I realised there were certain common denominators from freedom to a dialogue with the community, interdependence, but more importantly, organisations are no longer simply a set of characteristics, a position or the outcome of your customers dialogue. They're a vehicle. Yes, a vehicle.

Once you allow your organisation to become a vehicle, the magic happens; there is no limits for what wonderful places you can discover together. And time is not on humankind's side if we are to solve the social and environmental mess, we ourselves have created. You need to create change now. Not tomorrow. As a leader or an organisation, you need to set in motion a personal imperative for change.

What I picked up again and again in my conversations was that organisations should bring you on a personal journey, should transform you – it's not simply a transactional role but transformational. Time for organisations to chart a different path. It's the last purpose frontier – how can organisation realise the inner betterment of people? If you don't succeed in improving people's minds and behaviours, you won't succeed with the greater challenge of creating better ways of living in our communities, in society at large or in the challenged ecosystems we're dependent on.

As some societies have reached a more than sufficient level of material wealth, it's time for us to start focusing on inner human wealth: happiness, better connections with the community, less stress, fulfilled citizens. Materialism is a losing strategy. The happiness of buying new shoes is a short-lived dopamine kick, whereas finding better ways of living in balance with yourself adds lifelong value. It's time to create the right human and planetary balance. It's time to create a new leadership that enables people to move towards change. There is simply no one else to blame for the lack of change than yourself.

It's time to . . .

You fill in the blank.



### **Key takeaways**

- 1 Corporate purpose has to be redefined to enable the many rather than serving the few.
- 2 Globally increasing living standards and materialism fatigue, combined with digitalisation, automation, robotics and bio-tech, are strengthening the development towards a market driven by self-actualisation.
- 3 The corporate model has to be reinvented to better serve people rather than short-term profit. Models like B Corps and cooperatives are a step in the right direction.
- 4 In a fast-changing marketplace, customer-centricity is a minimum; it's about people's lives. Let people have a bigger say.
- 5 A better life is not something you give; it's something people create for themselves.



### **Questions to ask yourself**

- 1 Reading this book, how do you think these trends will develop? How do you think they will be strengthened? Weakened? Why?
- 2 In an everything-is-possible world, what would be your all-transformative promise?
- 3 What are the three key takeaways in this book that mattered the most to you or your organisation?
- 4 How do you share these learnings with your organisation or with your peers?
- 5 After reading, what is the one thing you'll have to act on now?

